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SUBJECT: CAMPAIGN POLITICS UPDATE

REF: GUATEMALA 2345

1. (SBU) Summary: With the registration of twelve presidential tickets complete, the presidential race has narrowed to four main contenders (only the top two in the first round, on November 9, will contend in the second round, on December 28). Oscar Berger of the tripartite GANA coalition is ahead by all measures, and seems certain to make the second round. Alvaro Colom (National Unity of Hope Party (UNE)), leads ruling Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) candidate Efraim Rios Montt for second place in the polls. Lionel Lopez Rodas, the National Advancement Party's (PAN) standard-bearer, trails behind the three front-runners in the polls but has effectively emphasizing a tough anti-crime message, responding to voter concerns. Judicial processes still cloud the picture, with continuing court review of Rios Montt's candidacy and rumors of coming challenges to Berger. With the campaign now in full swing, the candidates' messages are flooding the media, and civil society groups are at high alert for fraud and political violence. A presidential debate on September 16 did not attract Berger or Rios Montt, but gave smaller party candidates the chance to shine and question the integrity of published polls showing them out of contention. End Summary.

The Twelve

2. (U) The following 12 presidential candidates were registered with the Electoral Tribunal (TSE) before the September 10 deadline, and have until September 18 to complete all the documentary requirements for final confirmation:

- (1) "Frente Republicano Guatemalteco" (FRG) Guatemalan Republican Front
(P) Jose Efraim Rios Montt
(VP) Edin Raymundo Barrientos
- (2) "Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca" (URNG) Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union
(P) Rodrigo Asturias Amado
(VP) Pablo Ignacio Ceto Sanchez
- (3) "Gran Alianza Nacional" (GANA) Grand National Alliance
(P) Oscar Berger Perdomo
(VP) Eduardo Stein Barillas
- (4) "Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza" (UNE) National Unity of Hope
(P) Alvaro Colom Caballeros
(VP) Fernando Andrade Daz-Duran
- (5) "Partido de Avanzada Nacional" (PAN) National Advancement Party
(P) Leonel Lopez Rodas
(VP) Ruben Alfonso Ramirez
- (6) "Partido Unionista" (PU) Unionist Party
(P) Fritz Garca Gallont
(VP) Hector Cifuentes
- (7) "Democracia Cristiana Guatemalteca" (DCG) Christian Democratic Party
(P) Jacobo Arbenz Villanova
(VP) Rolando Castro De Leon
- (8) "Desarrollo Integral Autentico-Partido Libertador Progresista" (DIA-PLP) Authentic Integrated Development Party - Progressive Liberation Party
(P) Eduardo Suger
(VP) Maritza Ruiz de Vielman
- (9) "Cambio Nacional" (CN) National Change
(P) Manuel Conde Orellana
(VP) Estuardo Meneses
- (10) "Los Verdes" (LV) Green Party
(P) Rodolfo Rosales Garca-Salas
(VP) Emilio Recinos
- (11) "Union Nacional" (UN) National Union Party
(P) Fernando Arredondo
(VP) Jorge Canale Nanne

(12) "Democracia Social Participativa" (DSP) Democratic Social Participation
(P) Jose Angel Lee
(VP) Americo Cifuentes

Three other parties are running candidates for Congress, and mayoralties, without presidential or vice presidential candidates: the "Union Democratica" (UD) Democratic Union, "Alianza Nueva Nacion" (ANN) New Nation Alliance, and "Transparencia" Transparency Party.

Potential Legal Challenges

13. (SBU) No legal challenges have yet been filed against the registration of these candidates, with the exception of Rios Montt. On September 11, the Supreme Court announced that it would not hear appeals from the UNE and the GANA's Otto Perez Molina of Rios Montt's registration, respecting a Constitutional Court order against any further constitutional challenges to Rios Montt's candidacy. The Constitutional Court, for its part, has yet to rule on a similar appeal of Rios Montt's registration, but is widely expected to reject it. Some FRG leaders claim the GANA is also vulnerable to a legal challenge to its registration, which is complicated by its three-party alliance. Another GOG official recently told the Ambassador that legal charges may be filed against Berger for irregularities in a bus contract he signed years ago as mayor of Guatemala City, which could also potentially threaten his candidacy.

Battle of the Polls

14. (SBU) Ref reported the results of Vox Latina's latest poll, which showed Berger ahead with 38%, Colom in second with 18%, and Rios Montt in third with 11%. Lopez Rodas trailed at 7%, and 22% were undecided. The Vox Latina poll also showed Berger handily winning in the second round against either Rios Montt or Colom.

15. GOG sources tell us that the FRG's internal polls, supposedly conducted to simulate secret balloting, unsurprisingly put Rios Montt in second, at 21%, after Berger, with 32% of voter preferences. According to both polls, Colom is in third place with 18% and Lopez Rodas trails at 10%. Lopez Rodas told the Ambassador on September 11 that his own polling data shows him contending with Colom for second place, with 15%. A GANA-commissioned private Noguera poll shows Berger at 45%, Colom in second with 21%, Rios Montt in third with 14% and Lopez Rodas following with 6%, and claims a margin of error of 3.1%. In the Noguera poll, only 9% are undecided. A Demoscopia poll published in "Siglo XXI" on September 16 shows similar results, with Berger at 47%, Colom at 14%, Rios Montt at 13%, and Lopez Rodas at 7%. The Demoscopia poll reflects lower rates of voter indecision than Vox Latina's poll conducted over the same period and claims a margin of error of 2.8%.

16. (SBU) Colom and URNG presidential candidate Asturias have publicly criticized the polls as inflated in favor of Berger, and we are hearing rumors of strife within the media over distortions of poll results. The polls consistently show voter concern over crime and personal security, and unemployment as the two issues on most voters minds.

Debate: 15 minutes of Fame

17. (U) The first public debate involving most registered presidential candidates was held on September 16, under sponsorship of the Business Center (not to be confused with CACIF), OAS and the TSE's Political Party Forum. The Ambassador and other diplomats and dignitaries attended as "witnesses of honor." Berger, Rios Montt and Garcia-Gallont did not participate, for which they were roundly jeered by the crowd. Berger and the FRG were singled out for criticism from those remaining, the former for inflating poll results, the latter for the corruption and ineffectiveness of the current government. None of the candidates said they would raise taxes. All said more could be done with the resources now available to the government (including better tax collection) and most hinted at austerity programs while prioritizing social needs, rather than new spending. None responded to a question about re-certification by criticizing the process; instead, they competed to outdo each other on the importance of combating organized crime. Lopez Rodas promoted his "tough on crime" platform effectively, promising to make dramatic changes to improve security from "day one" of his Administration. Rosales, the Green Party candidate, bombastically criticized others, positioning himself as an outsider not tainted by previous government service.

18. (SBU) Colom criticized Berger for inflating the polls, asked rhetorically why campesinos are bearing the cost of

buses bought by Berger when he was mayor, promised to cancel a business transaction tax (IEMA), opposed privatization of health or education services, promised to fight organized crime, and revive a national dialogue and fiscal pact. Asturias, the URNG candidate, appeared old and frail, but gave reasoned responses, opposing privatization, and promoting the URNG's agenda to fully implement the peace accords. Eduardo Suger came off as professorial, often beginning his response to softball questions with "this issue is very complex..." Manuel Conde of the National Change Party was more energetic, and Arbenz exhibited gravitas but his proposals lacked substance. Following the debate, the participants (and the FRG) joined together to denounce the manipulation of polls, especially the Demoscopia poll, in favor of Berger, insisting that future polls were not authorized to use their names and party logos. The opposition press has reacted with studied indignation to this charge, and we are currently witnessing a big flap (which shall dissipate) as a result.

Campaign Issues/Strategies

19. (U) Berger had returned to Guatemala and the stump on September 8, after prostate surgery in NY. Since his return he has proposed investing in public works infrastructure projects (new capital airport, ring road, highways), to generate employment. On September 11 Berger said he was also contemplating tax cuts. His running-mate, Eduardo Stein, publicly proposed a governability pact among political parties on the same day. GANA campaign manager Eduardo Gonzalez told the press GANA is not concerned about Berger's fall of seven points in the Vox Latina poll, still hopes to win in the first round, and there will be no change to campaign strategy. The GANA is still finalizing its plan of government.

10. (SBU) Gen. Rios Montt has stepped down from his post as President of Congress to dedicate himself full-time to the campaign. Despite recent rumors of Rios Montt's ill health, his running-mate, Edin Barrientos, claimed on September 9 that the General is showing no signs of slowing down. The FRG has launched a massive media campaign under the slogan "Security, Well Being, Justice." The FRG announced plans to visit three or four municipalities each week between Thursday and Sunday, giving special attention to areas where major media do not penetrate, and keeping its distance from major media coverage (apart from paid advertising), which it considers biased. A dominant theme for FRG candidates is their intention to "take from the rich and give to the poor." For his part, President Portillo has made statements promising to increase the minimum wage by at least 8% (the VP later publicly pushed for 18%) and has been reproached by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal for overstepping bounds on GOG advertising of public works projects.

11. (U) Colom's team is giddy with the poll results uniformly showing Colom's steady climb in popularity, which they estimate even higher, at 23%, well above Rios Montt and Lopez Rodas. On the stump, Colom is emphasizing citizen security, job creation, poverty reduction, education and housing. Colom has also promised new roads to more marginalized municipalities he visits, and was the only candidate who showed up at a candidate forum convoked by the council of indigenous elders.

12. (SBU) Lopez Rodas told the Ambassador on September 11 that security and job creation are the major campaign issues, and he plans to attack them by "putting the Army in the streets on January 14 (inauguration day)," outlawing the possession of automatic weapons, criminalizing gang membership, taking control of the borders and forcefully prosecuting the war on drugs, contraband, and trafficking in persons. He said he chose to focus his message on crime and jobs after earlier messages on health and education caused eyes to glaze. (Note: the Noguera poll shows crime at the top of voter concerns (58%), followed by the general economic situation (25%) and lack of jobs (25%). End Note.) When pressed by the Ambassador about the dangers of giving the Army an internal security role, Lopez Rodas said the show of force in the streets would be used to prevent crime until corrupt police could be purged and the police force built up to the task. Employment will be generated by a massive home-building public works project, and labor peace secured by a general labor pact to be negotiated among government, business and labor leaders. The Ambassador concurred that greater gun control is needed, welcomed Lopez Rodas' emphasis on counter-narcotics, and pitched the shared importance of combating trafficking in persons.

Comment

13. (SBU) Berger's absence from the debate was not surprising. Since Serrano Elias came from behind to win the presidency after a similar debate in 1991, front-runners have

all declined to participate. It is no surprise either that Rios Montt has also avoided public debate. Given his lack of charisma, Colom would be wise to do so in future as well. His low-key demeanor translates as weakness in a combative format. In contrast, Lopez Rodas delivery is forceful and polished, but strikes us as feigned.

14. (SBU) While we don't have much faith in any particular poll, the general picture they describe implies that in Guatemala's two-stage election process, the interesting battle is for second place. With Berger securely leading the field (but probably losing support to Colom), the race for second place could easily affect the final outcome of the elections. If Rios Montt makes it to the second round with Berger, Berger will benefit from a massive anti-FRG vote. If, however, Colom or, more improbably (but not impossibly), Lopez Rodas join Berger in the second round, Berger loses the anti-FRG windfall, and conceivably the presidency.

HAMILTON